

Back to school, with fewer teachers, larger classes

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Kindergarten classes with 28 students. Middle schools with no sports. Counselors with 500 students to manage. Shorter library hours. And perhaps most dramatically, a school year shortened by as many as five days.

Welcome back to school, kids.

Students across Sonoma County will begin heading back to school this week, descending on campuses amid real evidence the harsh economic climate in California is having an impact.

"I really think that the community and the parents understand this time, in this economic collapse, the impacts are going to be felt at the school level," said Wade Roach, chief financial officer for Cotati-Rohnert Park School District.

And school officials are casting a wary eye at the months ahead, predicting an even grimmer 2010-11 year when federal stimulus dollars disappear.

Cotati-Rohnert Park, hammered by both budget cuts and declining enrollment, faces some of the most dramatic cuts in Sonoma County.

Kindergarten through third grade classes will grow from 20 students to 28; middle-school competitive sports have been axed; classified staff are working 10 fewer days this year and management has cut five days from their schedules.

In March, the district issued notices for the elimination of nearly 55 full-time jobs, 32 of which were elementary school teachers. Of those, officials have reinstated six



JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat
Mattie Washburn Elementary School kindergarten teacher Druscilla Moore cuts out laminated figures for her new bulletin boards in her Windsor classroom.



positions at the elementary level, two of three middle school counselors and two high school teachers, said Superintendent Barbara Vrankovich.

The district is expecting an enrollment of 6,100 when school opens Aug. 27, a drop of 200 students over the previous year. That decline equates to a loss of about \$1 million annually in state support for the district.

“I think that parents and the community will see that schools can’t do everything that they once used to do,” Vrankovich said. “Like back-to-school programs, events at night and on weekends, Halloween carnivals on Saturday . . . I have told (administrators) they cannot continue to do the things they used to.”

Cotati-Rohnert Park, the third-largest district in the county, is not alone.

Kindergarten through third-grade classes in Santa Rosa, Petaluma and Windsor will grow from 20 to 22 students.

Santa Rosa, which begins Aug. 17, cut funding for Lewis Adult School, boosted bus fees while eliminating routes, increased class sizes in ninth-grade math and English and is reigniting talks over shortening the school year to save money.

If Santa Rosa cuts five days from its 180-day student calendar, it could save more than \$2 million, said Associate Superintendent Doug Bower.

“We have had some preliminary discussions: What would we do in this scenario? Now that it’s actually here, the budget is done, those discussions would have to start again,” he said.

When school starts Thursday in Windsor, kindergarten teacher Dru Moore may be without a transitional aide for the first time in years.

Typically, the district has paid parents and other adults to spend the first week of school in kindergarten classrooms, helping 5- and 6-year-olds transition to school schedules, community bathrooms and new faces.

Not this year.

“This is the first year we won’t have them,” the 18-year teaching veteran said. “We usually used our parents, but they were paid, TB tested and fingerprinted. We are looking for that same kind of person, but they won’t be paid.”

Superintendent Steve Herrington said many students could be forced to change classrooms and teachers three weeks into the school year because the district can’t afford to keep under-enrolled rooms as is.

“It is really hard on a kiddo,” Moore said of potentially shifting rooms and teachers 20 days into the school year. “They have to let go of mom, they get used to me, then they have to move to another teacher.”

There will be 25 fewer employees in the 560-person Windsor district, Herrington said. Of those 25, 18 were classroom teachers, he said. There will also be fewer support staff doing maintenance and clerical work, he said.

“It’s going to wear people thin, that’s what I worry about,” he said. “You are going to see this play out over the next couple of years, some of these problems are going to fester.”

On Wednesday, Windsor teachers will vote on whether to accept a two-day reduction in the school year around Thanksgiving. Teachers have already agreed to one less professional development day.

In Petaluma, 10 teaching positions in grades four through 12 were eliminated and four were cut from kindergarten through third grades. In addition, employees there have a tentative agreement to shorten their work year by three staff development days.

That cut is equivalent to about 1.6 percent less pay a year, said Steve Bolman, Petaluma’s deputy superintendent.

Petaluma will no longer pay for substitutes to fill in for teachers who are members of professional groups like curriculum committees. Those meetings will now have to take place after school.

The district cut two counselors whose job was to deal with emotional and behavioral issues with students. That will now fall to academic counselors who will see their student load increase from 350 to 500 students in junior high and from 300 to 400 in high school.

“A lot of things that were outstanding and provided a great service for a lot of years, we just can’t afford,” Bolman said.

The district will this year only pay for coaches’ salaries and will turn to boosters and gate receipts to pay for other sports-related costs. And groups wishing to use the districts’ ball fields and multipurpose rooms will have to pay 10 percent more for the privilege.

The district slashed adult education in half — moving \$500,000 to the general fund.

“We are keeping the mandated programs, which are basically adults without high school diplomas,” Bolman said.

It also cut the coverage area of home-to-school bus service.

Students who continue to ride the bus will pay more — \$420 a year, up from \$400 last year.

Still, Bolman said he remains inspired by the resiliency of teachers and students.

“I walk onto our campuses to see what teachers are doing .□.□. I’m always amazed at what they are doing with limited resources,” he said.

Booster groups are girding themselves to shoulder a bigger load this year, despite fund-raisers that are struggling in a blighted economy.

“Those extra things that enrich your education already rely on the community, and our community is hurting,” said Leasa Graves, president of Piner High School’s Parent-Teacher-Student Association. “You felt the crunch last year. The economy started to dip and at fund-raisers the turnout wasn’t the same and funding wasn’t the same.”

School site councils, once a body of school officials and parents from which teachers could request funding for things like lab equipment, classroom supplies, field trip assistance and computer programs, now have, in some cases, no funds to work with. Those dollars were frozen last spring and now have been swept into districts’ general funds to pay for teachers, staff and operational costs.

“We would say, ‘OK, that’s great, but there is absolutely no money and we can’t give you anything.’ What is the purpose of the Site Council? That is something we are going to have to figure out,” said Cherie Wanger, vice president of Piner’s PTSA and a site council member.

“Learning about some of the things that teachers have to come and ask for, I just assumed that those things would be available,” Wanger said. “When teachers ask for bulbs and you have to turn them down, that just doesn’t seem right.”

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